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ABSTRACT

Within the Reading Recovery lesson framework, the "Making and Breaking" portion, which focuses on how words work, consists of a mere 1 to 3 minutes, yet can potentially provide a powerful reciprocal link between reading and writing. This article argues that careful consideration and utilization of effective language practices by the teacher can increase the power of the linking sound sequence with letter sequence experience in the Reading Recovery lesson framework. The article describes the many facets of language within the "Making and Breaking" portion of the Reading Recovery lesson, discussing eight key ideas: explain principles; use consistent language across the lesson; use explicit language and simple vocabulary; demonstrate first; explain why; begin with the child's known; use reciprocal language; and consider the child's Zone of Proximal Development. A conversation during "Making and Breaking" is attached. (SR)

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Communicating How Words Work.

by Dawn Osborne

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Communicating how words work

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"Language is a major cultural tool that enables us to think logically and to learn new behaviors. It influences more than just the content that we know; it also impacts thinking and the acquisition of new knowledge" (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p. 95). Careful consideration and utilization of effective language practices can increase the power of the linking sound sequence with letter sequence (Making and Breaking) experience in the Reading Recovery lesson framework.

As Reading Recovery teachers, we introduce children to the many and complex ways in which words work across the Reading Recovery lesson. As Clay (1993) explains,

> Slowly, throughout the reading and writing work of the Reading Recovery lessons the child is introduced to different ways of
> - constructing a new word in writing
> - or working out a new word in reading (p. 43).

The Making and Breaking portion of the lesson consists of a mere one to three minutes of the entire thirty-minute lesson. Yet, it has the potential to provide a powerful reciprocal link between reading and writing. Teachers frequently discuss the many ways in which letters can be manipulated to make learning how words work 'come alive' for the child. However, we may have often neglected the importance of communication with the child during Making and Breaking. This article will discuss the many facets of language within the Making and Breaking portion of the lesson. The following are key ideas to be considered as we work to improve our instruction of Reading Recovery children.

Explain principles. ". . . Its [Making and Breaking] intent is to help the child to understand the process of word construction, how words work, and how he can get help from words he knows to use on new words he needs to know" (Clay, 1993, p. 44). The teacher's language must explain concepts of how words work as opposed to individual words or lists of words. It is important for the teacher to use more than one example to illustrate her teaching. In this way, the teacher can, ". . . beware that learning how words work does not degenerate into *teaching words* for that is not the purpose of this part of the lesson. . . " (Clay, 1993, p. 46). For example, if the teacher wants the child to understand the concept of changing the onset of a word, she may demonstrate by changing the onsets of two different words (e. g., *look* to *took* and *dad* to *sad*). On the other hand, a less effective example would be changing the onset of just one word (e. g., *look* to make *took, book, cook,* and *hook*). The use of a single example leads the child to think about how one word can be changed to make a new word, a much narrower concept than in the former example where the child learns that he can change the onset of a known word to help him read or write an unknown word. Likewise, the teacher's explanation must reflect this much broader concept.

Use consistent language across the lesson. When explaining concepts to children, teachers need to use terms consistently. For instance, the terms *front, beginning,* and *first letter* are all clear and concise ways of describing the same part of a word. However, if the teacher uses these terms interchangeably during her explanation, the child may become confused. Choose one term that the child easily understands so he will know where to look when the teacher refers to a particular position. The following example illustrates this concept: "We can change the beginning letter to make a new word. Take this letter and change the beginning of this word to make it say ————."

Use explicit language and simple vocabulary. "Make your actions and the children's actions verbally explicit. Label your own actions as you carry them out. Label the child's actions for him as they occur. The more you tie language to action, the more you will help children use language to facilitate learning" (Bedrova, 1996, p. 105). Avoid using vague, technical, or unusual language that is not easily transferred to the child when explaining how words work. For example, "I like the way you visually scanned that word," can be simplified and clarified by saying something more like, "You changed the beginning letter to make a *new* word. Good!"

Concise, simple, and explicit language will help the child learn not only how words work but will also enable him to help himself understand how to think about words in other parts of the lesson. Wood (1998) explains, "When we suggest, remind, prompt or whatever, we are providing insights into processes that usually take place 'in our head'" (p. 98). He notes further that ". . .Vygotsky argues that such external and social activities are gradually internalized by the child as he comes to regulate his own intellectual activity" (p. 98). As Clay (1993) explains when discussing the verbalization of the process of checking on words, ". . . It seems legitimate to encourage a child to verbalise a strategy or a principle or a rule-like consistency because these have more general application. They have generative value" (p. 43). However, Clay cautions that, *"It is a tactic that could be overworked and could interfere with the automatic responding that goes with fluency"* (p. 43, emphasis hers).

Demonstrate first. It is important for the teacher to physically demonstrate and verbally explain the concept simultaneously. As Clay (1993) notes, "First we have to help the child to understand the task" (p. 44). With each new concept, the teacher manipulates the magnetic letters while explaining what she is doing, before asking the child to do likewise with a similar word. Notice how the teacher demonstrates making the word *cat* in the sample teacher-student interaction on page 12.

Explain why. To make even clearer the usefulness of what is learned in

continued on next page

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Making and Breaking, the teacher must explain to the child that this will help him figure out new words when he is reading and writing. This places the link in the child's mind for later in the lesson when the teacher may want him to use the process learned in Making and Breaking to problem-solve in reading and writing. This is demonstrated in the last sentence of the sample teaching interaction on page 12.

Begin with the child's known. Clay (1993) explains that it is important for the teacher to, "Create a link between what the child knows and something new and go back to what the child knows in order to make a link to another new word" (p. 44). Beginning with the child's known is a crucial point made by Clay (1993) in each part of the lesson. For example, in taking words apart in reading, she suggests that, "The aim is to have the child use what he knows. . ." (p. 47). In order to write a word, Clay (1993) again suggests, "Sometimes you have to 'make it like another word you know'. . ." (p. 35). In Making and Breaking, teachers select words from the child's writing vocabulary chart to demonstrate a concept since these words are known by the child ". . . in all its detail . . ." (Clay, 1993, p. 27). See the example on page 12 where the teacher begins with a known word.

... the teacher must assist the child to make links to understand that what he learns in Making and Breaking can be of help to him in his attempts to problem-solve in reading and writing.

Use reciprocal language. ". . . The teacher must remember to direct the child to use what he knows in reading when he is writing and vice versa. . . " (Clay, 1993, p. 11). Likewise, the teacher must assist the child to make links to understand that what he learns in Making and Breaking can be of help to him in his attempts to problem-solve in reading and writing. Clay (1993) makes clear that in reading children must learn to go from letters to sounds, while in writing they must be able to go from sounds to letters. Both ways can be attended to during Making and Breaking by manipulation of the language we use and the activities attempted.

For example, when teaching a child how to change the onset of words, the teacher might prompt the child to go from letters to sounds by asking the child to, "Add *c* to the beginning of *at* and read the new word." In this example, the teacher has named the letter and asked the child to determine the sound to read the word. Using the same example, while manipulating the language to demonstrate going from sounds to letters, the teacher may ask the child, "What would we add to the beginning of *at* to make *cat*?" Now the teacher has provided the sound while asking the child to provide the letter.

Consider carefully what the child needs to learn in addition to the concept of onset and rime. The teacher must demonstrate that the reciprocity of sounds to letters in writing and letters to sounds in reading can also be learned in Making and Breaking. By manipulating her language, the task she demonstrates, and the task that she asks the child to perform, the teacher enables the child to learn how to proceed from letters to sounds or sounds to letters.

Consider the child's Zone of Proximal Development. The teacher's level of support for Making and Breaking will consider the child's Zone of Proximal Development, a concept developed by Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978) to indicate the discrepancy between what the child is able to perform independently and what the child is able to perform with assistance. As the child becomes more adept at a task, the teacher's language must change

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That you are literate

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You have the gift
or is it the curse
to turn your ability
to read
on and off
like a light switch.

In the principal's office
you read
one word at a time
as if
you are looking them up
one by one
in a Spanish-English
dictionary;
the principal will ask,
her sentences are
broken
is there something wrong?

I have heard
you click off all lights
in the classroom,
playing a game of
see what happens if
I don't do a blessed thing,
see how long the teacher
lets me sit here
like a gray rock,
never even blinking
like a frog.

Because of this game
this **no-I-cannot-do-it,**
they are keeping you back
one more year
all because of the ability
you choose to hide
under your hat
like a rabbit.

Is it fair to show
only me
the truth that you can
read?
If I cry it out in the hallways,
she reads, she reads,
no one will
believe it.

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to allow him to become more independent. Yet the teacher's level of assistance must become more supportive again as the child moves into working with new concepts or activities that are more complex. The exchange between the teacher and the child in the box below illustrates this concept. Notice how the teacher uses language to lend heavy support while the child is learning a new task. Then she is able to withdraw some support, allowing more independence as the child's ability to perform the task increases and he approaches a new level of proximal development.

Language is a critical element in the reading and writing portions of Reading Recovery lessons. When planning Making and Breaking, Reading Recovery teachers think about and note on the lesson record the level of language support the child may require.

Also, they keep in mind and note the specific principle about how words work that is being taught in addition to the words that they will use to teach the principle. These practices help keep the focus of our teaching during Making and Breaking on a conceptual level as opposed to an item level of instruction.

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A conversation during Making and Breaking

In the example used below, the teacher's focus is on the principle of adding and changing the onset of a word, one of several ways that "words work" as presented by Clay (1993).

Teacher (showing magnetic letters on the magnetic board): This is a word you know, *at* (running finger under word as she reads). Look at the word. Say it slowly and run your finger under it (p. 44).

Child: *At.*

Teacher: I can make a new word by adding a letter to the beginning. (Adds *c* to beginning.) *Cat* (runs finger under word while reading). Run your finger under it and say it.

Child (running finger under word): *Cat.*

Teacher: Good. Now I can turn it back into *at* (removes *c* and reads). Now you read it.

Child: *At.*

Teacher: Good. Now you add the letter to the beginning of *at* and read the new word.

Child (adds *c* to beginning): *Cat.*

Teacher: Now take the letter off the beginning and turn it back into *at*. Read it.

Child (removes *c* and reads): *At.*

The child now understands the task, hence the Zone of Proximal Development is changed as does the teacher's language support.

Teacher: Good job. This is another word you know. (Shows magnetic letters representing *and*.) Say it slowly and run your finger under it.

Child (runs finger under word): *And.*

Teacher: Can you make *and* into *land*?

Child (adds *l* to *and*): *Land.*

Teacher: Very good. How did you turn *and* into *land*?

Child: I put a letter on the beginning.

Teacher: Yes, you made a new word by adding a letter to the beginning. That can help you when you read and write, too!

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